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SUBJECT: ARGENTINA: UPDATES ON THEFT OF CESIUM 137

REF: BUENOS AIRES 00173

¶1. (SBU) GOA officials report that the Argentine Federal Police (PFA) have now taken the lead in the investigation of yesterday's theft of nuclear material in Neuquen, Argentina. The GOA's Nuclear Energy Commission (CNEA), Nuclear Regulatory Agency (ARN), Neuquen provincial police, and the Gendarmeria are also involved. Police sources reported to RSO that there had been an anonymous extortion telephone call asking for 500,000 pesos (about \$143,000) for the return of the stolen material. This has not been reported in the press as of yet. News of the theft itself has been reported in some local media outlets (see web links below), but hasn't been picked up yet in national Argentine media.

¶2. (SBU) Gabriel Terigi at the ARN told us that the team sent out to Neuquen on February 19 has been working with the same type of detection equipment used in the U.S. for similar incidents. He noted that the intruders had neutralized the security camera when they entered the site, thus giving additional weight to the suspicion that they were familiar with the installation. Terigi added that the police are currently combing the most likely areas of Neuquen where the thieves may have taken refuge and are also investigating the possibility that disgruntled ex-employees may have been involved in the theft.

¶3. Argentine media stories on this episode follow:

www.lmneuquen.com.ar/noticias/20092/20/19418.php (article in La Manana -- Neuquen)

www.rionegro.com.ar/diario/2009/02/20/1235099_001235.php
(article in Rio Negro Online)
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